

The Art of the Book in India

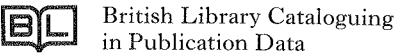
by Jeremiah P. Losty

The British Library

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Preface

The exhibition *The Art of the Book in India* (16 April–1 August, 1982) is the British Library's contribution to the Festival of India, held in 1982 under the joint patronage of the Rt. Hon. Margaret Thatcher, M.P., and Shrimati Indira Gandhi.

I must here express my gratitude to all those individuals and organizations which have made the exhibition possible, and first of all to the lenders who are listed on p.2. I am under a deep obligation for help and advice to the keepers of the Indian collections of many museums and libraries in Europe, India and the USA for making it possible to see their treasures and for recommending their loan. To those in New Delhi concerned with organizing the loan of manuscripts from India, to Dr Kapila Vatsyayan and her colleagues in the Department of Culture, to the authorities of the National Museum, and to the British Council Division, especially Robert Frost and Sushma Bahl, go my warmest thanks.

In an exhibition covering so many different disciplines and languages, some must necessarily lie outside the scholarly competence of any one individual. I am deeply grateful to all those colleagues in the British Library who have patiently answered my numerous queries, above all to Norah Titley, for her unstinting encouragement and advice.

I cannot conclude without expressing the debt I owe my wife for her constant support and her help in preparing the manuscript.

J.P. Losty

Notes

Only the titles of oriental works and technical terms are recorded in full transliteration.

Dates quoted from manuscripts are recorded with the year in the original era (*Samvat*, *Śaka*, Nepal or *Hijra*) followed by the AD date.

David Cripps supplied the photographs for 12, 15, 16, 24, 28–30, 37–9, 42, 45, 56, 90 and 91. All others were supplied by the lenders or taken in the British Library.

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Introduction

What is a book? Physically, it could be said, it is a collection of pieces of paper of the same size between covers and held together by glue and string. In another sense, it is the intellectual content conveyed by the words which are written or printed on the pages. All cultures are in agreement with the latter statement; comparatively few would agree with the former. Two thousand years ago in the Mediterranean world a book was physically a long roll of papyrus or of parchment. At the same time in China it was a collection of thin strips of bamboo or pieces of silk.

In India, the earliest concept of the book was as a collection of leaves or sheets of bark strung together between covers by a cord. The Indians would have viewed with horror both the slaughtering of young animals for their skin and the writing of sacred texts on such material, while paper, which was invented in China in the 1st century, did not come into general use in northern India before the 13th century, at about the same time as in Europe, in each case the Muslim world being the intermediary. In southern India, however, palm leaves continued in general use until the 19th century as the normal writing material.

The first references to writing in India, found in the earliest layers of the Pali Buddhist Canon of about the 5th century BC, speak of various types of material used for writing, such as leaves (*paṇṇa*), wood (*phalaka*, or boards, and *śalākā*, or bamboo chips or slips), and metals. The type of leaves is unspecified, but there is no reason to believe that it is as yet actually the usual writing palm of ancient India, the talipot (*Corypha umbraculifera*), for the latter is indigenous only to the extreme south of the peninsula, of which the early Buddhist texts had no knowledge. In fact any kind of suitable leaf was probably made use of, as leaves of the plantain and *śāla* trees were used in village schools until recent times.

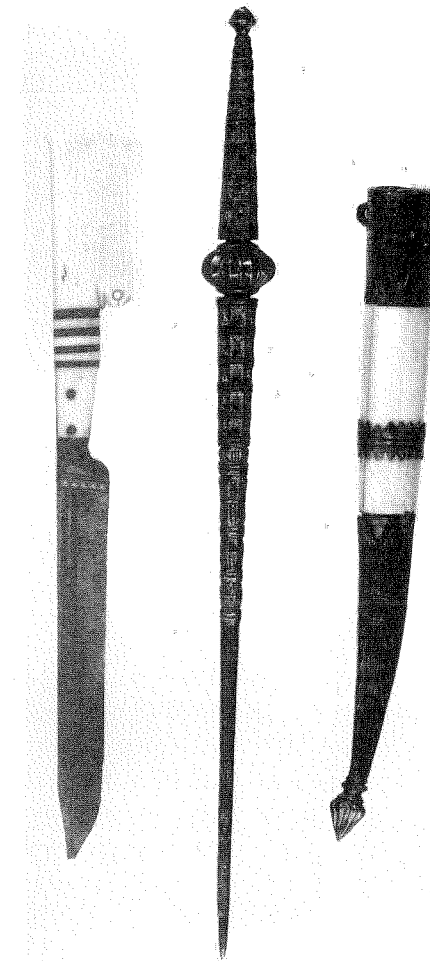
Since much of what is known of the social history and material culture of ancient India is deduced from the *obiter dicta* of authors actually writing about something else, any argument 'from silence' must be used with extreme caution. Nonetheless, there is, as Rhys David long ago pointed out, an absolute silence about books (as physical objects, that is) in the Buddhist Canon, despite long inventories of what monks are and are not permitted to own, which argues that literary or religious texts were not committed to writing, while the repeated assertion that *suttas* (the Buddha's discourses) could be lost through a monk's having no disciple to teach them to, argues very strongly that the mere possibility of writing down the Buddhist sacred texts could not be entertained. This is not only the Indian aversion to the written as opposed to the oral tradition, but the very real problem that no writing material known in the 6th and 5th centuries BC was usable for writing connected literary or scriptural texts, as opposed to records, letters, or accounts. It is clear therefore that the use of the talipot must have been unknown to the north of India at this time, and seems still to have been unknown by the late 4th century BC, since it is not included with the writing materials (bark and cloth) noted by the Greek companions of Alexander. It can only have been with the expansion of the Mauryan empire into the south of India in the 3rd century BC that the talipot could have become known to the northern Indians, and its possibilities exploited for the writing of literary and religious texts.

The leaves of the talipot in its natural state are arranged like a fan and are about 1.3m long and 15cm wide at their broadest, tapering off to both ends, being divided by a central rib around which the leaf naturally folds. Each fold is cut from the rib, and fashioned into its finished shape, about 6.5–9cm broad by up to a metre in length, and then subjected to several processes of boiling, drying, and rubbing. The finished leaf is a smooth and flexible, light-brown surface. The size varies very much according to the purpose for which the leaves are needed. A long religious text would be written on leaves of the maximum possible length. A shorter text would usually be written on leaves of lesser length, which would enable the breadth to be somewhat greater, if desired, but this did not necessarily follow. Precise evenness of breadth was difficult to achieve in such a medium, and whereas many of the fine-quality palm-leaf manuscripts from eastern India of the 10th to 12th centuries taper only slightly towards their ends, in those from western India the difference is much more noticeable.

Hoernle writing in 1900 states that the talipot, *Corypha umbraculifera*, grows wild fairly commonly in Ceylon and the Malabar coast, and cultivated up both coasts as far as Bombay in the west and lower Bengal in the east, although the latter very uncommonly. Inland it does not grow at all. There must have been in ancient India a flourishing trade in the leaves, either in their raw or finished states, from south to north. The western manuscripts tend to be uneven in quality and size, suggesting that supplies could be difficult to get; this is particularly true of the period from the 13th century on, after the Turkish conquest. The eastern manuscripts on the other hand tend to be much more even, suggesting availability of a good supply, and they may have been in much more intensive cultivation in Bengal then than now. All the same, the great scriptoria of Bihar and Nepal would have had to have obtained their supplies from a source at some considerable distance. Palm leaves were still obtainable after the Turkish conquest of eastern India, and were used in eastern India up to the 17th century, but always on a much smaller size of prepared leaf than in the 12th century.

In southern India, the home of the talipot, early manuscripts are extremely rare, but this type of palm leaf was used in the earliest surviving southern manuscripts, of c. 1112, in the Digambara *bhaṇḍār* at Moodabidri. However, those manuscripts from southern India which have survived from about the 16th century on, use a different palm leaf, that of the palmyra (*Borassus flabellifer*), a fan palm similar to the talipot, but somewhat smaller as to its leaf size. This is a less tender tree than the other, able to stand the colder winter climate of northern India, and was introduced from East Africa. According to Hoernle, the earliest reference to such a tree in India is dated 1328, but the evidence seems to suggest that the leaves were not widely used for writing until the 16th century. Manuscripts of this material are much less broad, about 3.75cm being the maximum.

It is clear then that round about 1500 there was a decided change from the one palm to the other. The talipot is useful only for its leaves, but the palmyra for all its products including fruit and sap, giving *tāḍī* or toddy, as well as being far easier to cultivate. In the course of a few centuries it completely ousted the widespread cultivation of the talipot in southern India, so that palmyra leaf had to be adopted as a writing material *faute de mieux*. This changeover also coincided with the introduction of paper

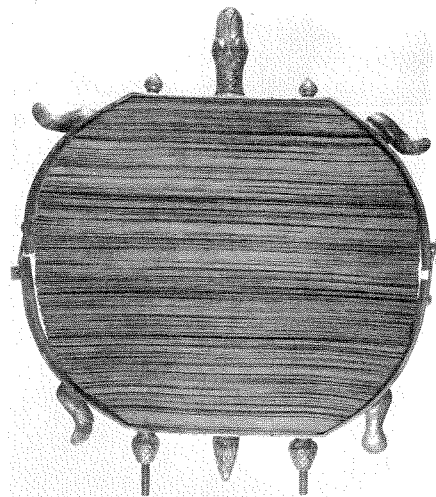


Iron stylus for incising palm leaves, with knife for trimming and erasing, and sheath. Andhra Pradesh, 18th century. Bodleian Library, Ms. Sansk. a. 1.

into the plains of northern India, so that the flourishing export trade of talipot leaves from south to north ceased and the commercial cultivation of talipot groves of the sort described by Hsüan Tsang in the 7th century became uneconomic. Only in Ceylon and Burma where the talipot grows far more readily, were its leaves still generally used for the production of manuscripts.

It is undeniable, however, that the leaves of the palmyra are inferior as writing material to those of the talipot, being less flexible, smaller, and more difficult to write on, while not taking ink well at all. The changeover from the one to the other involved also a change in the method of writing. All the talipot manuscripts known from northern India, as well as the much earlier fragments found in Central Asia, are written on with a reed pen (*lekhanī*) using ink (*maṣī*), although it would seem from Rājashekara's evidence (writing in Kanauj about 900) that they could also be incised with an iron stylus (*loha-kaṇṭaka*). The former method was used right up until the cessation of writing on palm leaves in northern India, an area which for the purposes of this discussion may be taken to be north of a line from Goa to Calcutta. However, with the exception of the early Jaina manuscripts of c. 1112 referred to above, all the manuscripts from India south of this line, have their texts written on the leaves through incision with an iron stylus. After inscribing, the leaves were usually, although not invariably, smeared with ink (usually carbon based) and then cleaned with sand, leaving the ink in the incised letters which otherwise would have been almost invisible. As it was difficult to write directly on to the leaves of the palmyra, the method of inscribing became the only one used in southern India after its widespread adoption as the normal writing palm. However, before its introduction into the Indian subcontinent only shortly before this, all the earlier southern manuscripts must have been on the talipot, as we find in the manuscripts in Moodabidri; and as in the north, it is probable that both methods of writing were used. It is perfectly possible to use the incision method with a talipot, as most Burmese and Ceylonese manuscripts are written in this fashion, although in neither instance are the leaves rubbed as fine and smooth as the ancient talipot manuscripts with surface writing from northern India.

The finished pile of leaves whether talipot or palmyra was normally strung on a cord (*sūtra* or *nāḍī*) through pre-bored holes, and protected by a pair of covers (*paṭa* or *paṭlī*), usually wooden, at top and bottom of the pile. The earliest palm-leaf manuscripts tend to have a single hole bored about one-quarter of the way from the left edge. The odd position of the hole in these early manuscripts suggests that the format is based on an earlier one using different materials, probably wooden strips with holes at one end and kept strung together, as known from Khotan in the 2nd century. These were used as letters and accounts, not for literary purposes. Very long manuscripts at a later date have a similar hole one quarter of the way from the right edge. This second hole does not appear to serve any useful function, as long manuscripts are traditionally bound up with the string passing through only the left holes. It is wound round the pile several times, then passed diagonally across to the position of the right holes, but only wound round the outside and fastened in a loop. Sometimes the cord is replaced by two metal spikes fastened to one cover. The manuscript could then be protected by a square piece of cloth wrapped round it, or put in a specially made wooden box if important



Tamil Ms. on palmyra leaves enclosed by a brass frame in the shape of a tortoise. 18th century. British Library, Add.6780.

enough. Over the centuries the hole in manuscripts which had only the one tended to move nearer and nearer the natural position for it, *i.e.* the centre of the leaf. In addition to wood, the covers could be of metal or ivory or other materials, or sometimes no more than strengthened leaves. Wooden covers could be painted or carved and inlaid with precious stones or ivory, while metal ones could be sculpted with images. The Sanskrit term for the physical form of such a manuscript is *pustaka*, usually translated as 'book'. The Hindi derivative *pothī* is used to describe this type of book, for the format of the palm-leaf manuscript was used also for many other materials – bark, ivory, metals, cloth – and was retained for many centuries in northern India after paper had generally replaced the talipot. Palm leaves could however also be cut into different shapes, making manuscripts in the shape of a cow, or a Shiva *lingam* or a rosary, often with minutely incised writing. Special covers might also be required, such as the brass tortoise enclosing an 18th-century Tamil manuscript.

The palm leaf is a writing material which was in universal use at one time or another across the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent, yet it seems almost certainly not to have been the earliest material so used. That the talipot was unknown in north-western India when Alexander invaded the Panjab is clear from the contemporary Greek accounts now lost but quoted in later sources. We are told firmly that the Indians used as writing materials the inner bark of trees, and well-beaten cotton cloth. The former is of course the inner bark of the common birch *Betula utilis*, which known as the *bhojapattra* or *bhūrja* grows freely in the Himalayan regions, and which provided the Hindu Kashmiris with their writing material until the 18th century.

The shape of birch-bark manuscripts varies considerably over the centuries. The earliest known, the 2nd-century Ms. Dutreuil de Rhins in Paris and Leningrad, is in the shape of a long scroll, with strips of birch bark pasted together. For other manuscripts, on the other hand, the original sheet was cut into long narrow strips conforming to the *pothī* format, with stringholes, which are of doubtful utility in such a manuscript due to their friability. Many of the Gilgit manuscripts (4th–8th centuries) conform to this pattern, but this cache of manuscripts also contained magnificent manuscripts on large sheets of bark far larger than any palm leaf, though again in the *pothī* format (No. 1). These originally would have had long wooden covers, perhaps decorated.

All these manuscripts come from a quite wide area of the western Himalayan regions through into Afghanistan, but we know from al-Bīrūnī and Rājashekara that birch bark was used over a much wider area of northern India. After the Turkish conquest, the vale of Kashmir, long renowned for its Sanskrit learning, was left isolated as the only centre for the production of birch-bark manuscripts; and even there the introduction of Muslim manuscripts into the valley after the 14th century radically affected the format of this the last period of their production. The sheets of bark were cut to fairly large rectangles and then about eight to ten at a time were folded in two and sewn into sections, and the sections sewn together into a codex shape; the whole was then covered with a binding which sometimes was of rough leather. This radical departure from traditional Hindu practice would seem to have begun as early as the 15th century, as all birch-bark manuscripts after this date are in this upright format, even though few still have their original bindings. All

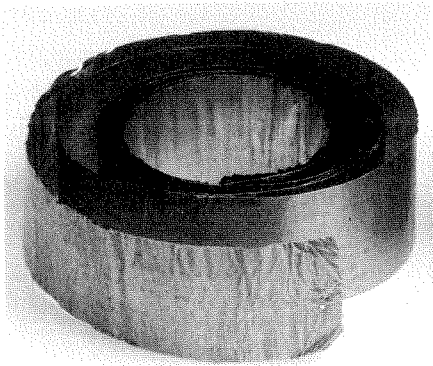
birch-bark manuscripts were written on with pen and ink, that used in the later Kashmiri manuscripts being famous for its indelible properties.

The birch was not the only tree whose bark was used as a writing material. At the other end of the Himalayas in that other enclosed valley, the Assam valley of the Brahmaputra, the inner bark of the aloe tree (*Aquilaria agallocha*) known locally as the *sāñcī* was used as a writing material. Although no extant manuscript appears to be earlier than the 15th century, it is known from Bāna's 7th-century account, when King Bhāskaravarman of Assam sent as presents to the great King Harsha of Kanauj, jewels, silks, and 'volumes of fine writing with leaves made from aloe bark, and of the hue of the ripe pink cucumber'. This lovely description fits perfectly well the 18th-century manuscripts commissioned by the Ahom Kings (No. 121). These sheets of bark when suitably prepared were written on with pen and ink. Unlike the large sheets of birch bark they bear a hole in the centre of the leaf, often ornamented, and traditionally were threaded with a string or *nāḍī*. The *sāñcīpāt* leaves have a tendency to split at the edges, but are otherwise tough and durable. The upper and lower covers were usually thick leaves of the same bark, still with the outer layer on.

The other early writing material referred to by Nearchos (quoted by Strabo) is well-beaten cotton cloth, a material (*paṭa* or *kārpārsika paṭa*) to which reference is made in early Sanskrit legal literature being used for official documents. Texts for engraving on stone or copper plates were written on cloth before being handed over to the engraver. None has survived from a very early period, but it may be assumed that, as in later times, it had to be made writable on by first stiffening it with paste and then covering it with a suitable ground. The earliest surviving example appears to be a solitary leaf from a *pothī* manuscript on silk found in Sinkiang, but probably of Indian origin, datable on palaeographic grounds to the 8th century and in a northern Indian hand (British Library Or.8212/1594). Such manuscripts are extremely rare; a complete one dated 1351 is reported to be preserved in a Jaina library in Patan in Gujarat.

The cloth scroll is a format of considerable antiquity, and was used almost exclusively for horoscopes and almanacs. The soothsayers summoned by Siddārtha to expound the meaning of his wife's dreams are shown on the illustrated *Kalpasūtra* manuscripts with long scrolls of cloth (No.26) from which they make their pronouncements. The writing on these scrolls commences parallel to the short side, proceeds to the end of the scroll, and if more space is required proceeds back along the reverse side. The same format is seen in the 2nd-century birch-bark scroll from Gandhara. The ancient tradition of painting on large squares of cloth is found continued, remarkably, in the great manuscript of the *Hamzanāma* commissioned by the Mughal Emperor Akbar about 1570 (No.54). This huge project involved the preparation of 1400 paintings on separate sheets of cloth, with the text normally written on the reverse.

These materials – birch bark, cloth, aloe bark, and palm leaf – were the normal materials of which books were made in ancient India. But faced with their impermanence in the Indian climate, the ancient Indians turned naturally to stone and metal when they wanted to record a text for all time. Everlasting stone, used widely for inscriptions from the 3rd century BC, was occasionally used by a royal author to demonstrate his literary as well as his martial talents. Buddhist tradition records that the



A treaty between the Zamorins of Calicut and the Dutch East India Company engraved on a gold strip 2·03m long in 1691. India Office Library, Malayalam Ms. 12.



Land-grant on seven plates of copper, AD664, with seal of the Eastern Chālukyas. British Library, Ind. Ch. 6.

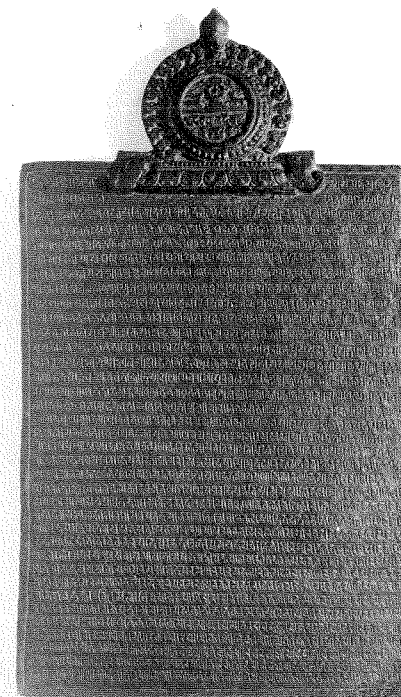
Canon was inscribed on sheets of gold in Ceylon in 88 BC, and on sheets of copper in Mathura in the reign of Kanishka (?1st century AD). None of these has survived, but from a very early period are found votive offerings on gold or silver inscribed with the Buddhist creed, which would appear to have been placed in *stūpas* or buried in the foundations of monasteries or similar religious foundations. Buddhist texts were frequently inscribed on metal plates, and strung between covers as if they were palm-leaf manuscripts. The practice of writing on long strips of palm leaf kept in spirals which was prevalent in southern India, Nepal, and Ceylon, for letters and official documents, was imitated in at least two spectacular instances in gold and silver, in a pair of treaties exchanged between the Zamorins of Calicut and the Dutch East India Company engraved on long strips of gold and silver in 1691 and c. 1711.

Another precious material used for manuscripts is ivory sheets, with the text incised. Due to its extreme fragility in the Indian climate, little of this material has survived from an early period, but several manuscripts are known from the 18th and 19th centuries.

More ubiquitous even than the stone inscriptions are the copper-plate charters (*tāmraśāsana*), which record the granting of land to individuals from the king, represented by his chief minister or chief of staff, of which examples survive from the 4th century. These records were first copied out on cloth, birch bark or palm leaf, before being handed over to the copper smith (*ayaskāra*) for engraving. The originals were apparently kept in the royal chancellery and the plates were given to the donee.

The smiths copied not only the letters but also the shapes of the original, the charters from southern India being long and narrow in imitation of palm leaves, from northern India being comparatively wider. The text was incised parallel to the long side. Usually several sheets were required to complete the text, and these were written in the usual *poṭhī* format, with blank first and last sides, and then strung through a hole on a ring to which could be affixed a large bronze boss cast from a mould bearing the royal seal. Some dynasties of northern India preferred to issue grants in large single sheets with the seal welded or riveted on. They were usually kept not in secure storage but buried at the boundaries of the land which had been granted. They were especially important as the only permanent records of land holdings and were frequently altered by beating out the important details and reincising: and in later centuries entirely spurious grants are commonplace. The largest grant so far discovered is on 55 plates weighing 216lb with over 2,500 lines, issued by Rājendra Cola in AD 1024.

Most of these materials, apart from palm leaves, birch bark and *sāñcī* bark, were used for special purposes for which the newest material, paper, could not be substituted. This material, officially invented according to Chinese annals by one Tsai Lun in AD 105, was formed by pulping and shredding materials of vegetable origin in a solution of water and gum and catching the suspended fragments on a fine mesh; when allowed to dry, a malleable and durable sheet of considerable strength is the result. The Chinese after perfecting the process used the bark of the paper mulberry as the vegetable basis of their paper. The process was learnt by the Arabs after the conquest of Samarkand in 751, and spread throughout the Middle East, but linen rags were substituted for the mulberry bark. This sort of paper was introduced by the Turks after their conquest of northern India, in the early 13th century. There is some



Single copper plate issued at Monghyr in c.AD854, with Pāla seal riveted on. Iveagh Bequest.

evidence, however, to show that another kind of paper was in use at least in the Himalayan regions long before this.

Numerous examples of paper manuscripts in Indian scripts were discovered in the various archaeological expeditions sent to Central Asia in the early years of this century. The paper used in these manuscripts is of poor quality and in no way compares with the many specimens of beautiful papers used for Chinese manuscripts found, for example, in the Cave of the Thousand Buddhas at Tunhuang. It is usually unbleached, off-white or dirty-brown in tone, and suggests that its makers while knowledgeable in the techniques of papermaking were either insufficiently skilled to be capable of the manufacture of, or simply indifferent to, such a high-quality product. They are all in the *poṭhī* format and in a variety of hands, one of them being a large calligraphic variety of the Gupta script used exclusively in Central Asia. Examples of paper manuscripts from Central Asia such as the Weber and Macartney Mss. (in the Bodleian and British Libraries) include, however, texts written in scripts of undeniable Indian origin, the northern and western varieties of the Gupta script, which were thought to have been copied by Indian scribes in Central Asia. However, the discovery of a large cache of paper manuscripts in Gilgit in 1931 along with birch-bark manuscripts suggests that papermaking was practised at least in the Himalayan regions of the Indian subcontinent by the 6th century AD. Knowledge of the process may have spread to Gilgit across the Karakorum, or perhaps along the Himalayan trade route from Nepal.

Papermaking in another part of the Himalayan region, the valley of Nepal, was undertaken since at least the 12th century, since two manuscripts dated 1105 (now in the Asutosh Museum in Calcutta) and 1185 (No. 11) are now known. The earlier manuscript is on a greyish-brown paper, the later on a paper dyed dark blue and written in gold and silver ink, a style that was especially popular in Nepal in later centuries. In place of the mulberry, Nepalese papers all used the bark of the daphne as the raw vegetable material, which grows on the high hills surrounding the Kathmandu valley.

It is perhaps extraordinary that if papermaking was practised as early as the 6th century, its use should not have been more widespread. However, these ancient papers depended on the use of plants which grow only in the Himalayas, so that its manufacture was severely localized. The same of course is true of birch bark, but by the middle of the first millennium AD its use was sanctified by centuries of traditions, so that there was little incentive to change to a new material which involved an even more laborious preparation and was not especially suitable to the climate of the north Indian plains. Even in Nepal where papermaking was clearly well-established by the 12th century, the number of palm-leaf manuscripts surviving far outstrips those on paper until the 16th century.

It was the Middle Eastern type of paper made from shredded cloth rather than bark which began to undermine the pre-eminence of the traditional materials in northern India from the 13th century, and this happened comparatively quickly in the west so that scarcely any palm-leaf manuscripts from this area are later than the 15th century. But traditionalist concepts asserted themselves in the formats of the Hindu and Jaina manuscripts in their *poṭhī* format, and like the Nepalese paper manuscripts they are cut to the same shape as the earlier materials. At

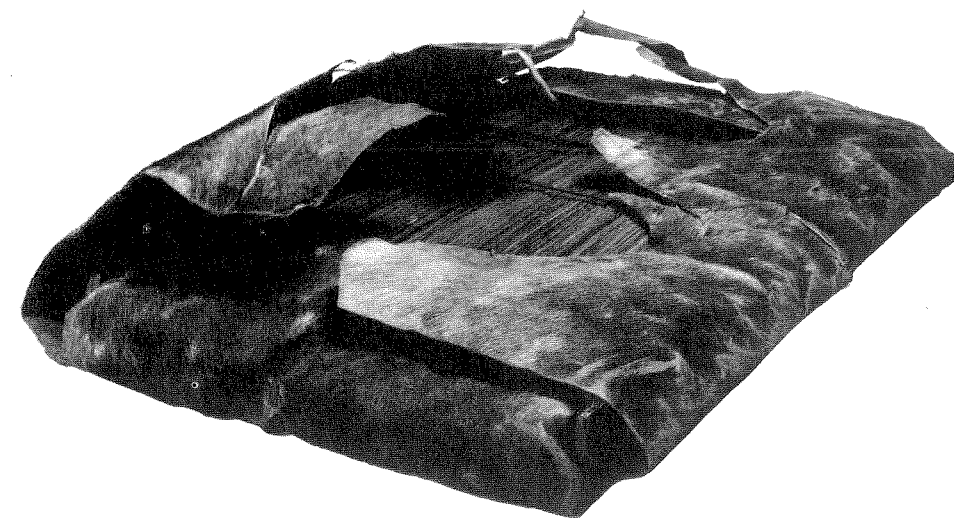
first in the height : width ratio of 1 : 3. they gradually increase the height to 1 : 2 by the 15th century and this shape is maintained until the 18th century for most types of manuscripts.

For manuscripts in Arabic and Persian, and those Indian languages like Urdu normally written in the Arabic script, no material was thought suitable other than paper, and at the earliest Muslim court in Delhi, historians were soon hard at work writing up the conquest on paper which was first imported from Iran, but which was later produced in India in centres like Daulatabad, Ahmadabad, Lahore, and Kashmir. The centres of excellence of paper manufacture were by the 16th century producing beautiful papers of thick and durable quality, capable of being highly burnished and decorated. Until the 18th century the production centres and methods for manufacturing paper for Muslim and Hindu manuscripts were different. Hindu papermaking was apparently much more localized, and the sheets of paper produced were much smaller, normally the size of the folio required for a manuscript, rather than the much larger sheets requiring cutting favoured by the Muslim centres. In good-quality Persian manuscripts the text is written in the centre of the page and margins in gold and colours drawn all round, forming a central text panel. The sharpness of the tools needed for the marginating often caused the panel to split from its borders. Also the borders suffered far more than the central panels from normal wear and tear, and could easily be replaced.

Manuscripts in languages written in the Arabic script were bound and covered in the normal Middle Eastern way, *i.e.* leather over boards. These bindings differ somewhat from western ones in that they are 'roundback', *i.e.* the front and back covers flow smoothly round into the spine without a strengthening ridge, and are never 'hollowback', *i.e.* the spine is always stuck to the backs of the sections. They also lack a square, a protrusion of the covers beyond the edges of the folios on three sides, and often have a flap, a leather piece attached to the front edge of the rear cover which covers the front of the folios and rests beneath the front cover. There are very few surviving early examples, of which some have rudimentary tooling. At least from the late 16th century, in the Mughal studio, much more elaborate bindings were attempted, with gold-tooling, stamping, gilding, and also pasteboard covers painted and lacquered instead of being covered with leather (Nos.65, 66).

The earliest imitations of such bindings on Hindu manuscripts are from Kashmir, where birch-bark sheets were folded into sections, sewn together and bound with a leather cover from at least the 15th century.

A compromise between the Hindu *poṭhī* and the Muslim codex format was reached in the 17th century, in which a pile of paper folios in the *poṭhī* format was folded in two, and sewn in a single section, each bifolium being sufficiently wide for even half of it, the single folio, to be in a landscape format. The cover could be made of board covered with cloth or leather, or even nothing but a piece of leather (as No.99), and was united with the rest of the manuscript in the single sewing, a fairly heavy cord being used. The pages were protected in this rather rudimentary binding by several flyleaves at beginning and end, and very stiff pieces of paper or card inserted under the cord in the centre. Later in the 18th century, manuscripts in this format but vertical rather than horizontal were produced (No.101). The text areas are however still between side margins, and not yet contained within frames. This final approximation



Oriya Ms. on palmyra leaves wrapped in a gazelle skin. 18th century. British Library, Add.5033.

occurs in manuscripts of the late 18th century from Kashmir and in certain northern traditions based on those of Kashmir, as at Jaipur, where fine-quality papers were used. In these traditions the folios are now sewn section by section, and stitched at the back, and a cover usually with a flap attached. Even in these manuscripts, however, the sewing is only rarely at the long edge at right-angles to the line of the text (No.126). More usually the text is parallel to the long-edge of the paper, and the sewing is therefore at the top, still keeping to the *poṭhī* format (Nos.128-9). Occasionally the sewing is along the short side, which means that the text even on a *poṭhī*-shaped leaf has to be written the same way up on both recto and verso.

The covers of this type of manuscript usually include a flap called a *jihvā* (tongue); often a cord attached to the tip of the flap is meant to be wound round the manuscript for added security. Cloth was normally used to cover the boards—brocade, velvet, silk, or cotton, often gorgeously embroidered with coloured threads or gold and silver wire (Nos.128-9). Leather was also used as well from the 18th century, usually deerskin, but sometimes a more exotic material such as tiger skin could be used (British Library Add.26539).

Finally, as an added protection against the ravages of insects (termites, white ants, silverfish) and the extremes of temperature and humidity, manuscripts of all different formats were wrapped up, usually in large square pieces of cloth, and sometimes committed to boxes. The cloth traditionally used was cotton dyed with an orpiment preparation containing arsenic, in which bundles of paper or palm-leaf *poṭhīs* would be wrapped up. Occasionally another material is used, such as a deer skin round a very long palm-leaf *poṭhī* (British Library Add.5033). Fine quality manuscripts would have their own individual cloths and the richer the manuscript the more elaborate the cloth, which could be of silk stitched over a tougher coarser cotton as in Nepal, or the most elaborate brocade. The imperial *Pādshāhnāma* in Windsor Castle (No.82) is still kept in its fine brocade cover from the royal library in Lucknow. Sometimes specially decorated boxes would be made; a tradition associates the name of the great 15th-century Assamese Vaishnava reformer Shankaradeva with the painting of a manuscript container.

India's literary tradition is older by 1,000 years than the earliest references to writing in the Buddhist scriptures. The culture of Vedic

India was an oral one, in which poetry and religious literature were handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, remembered word perfectly by a complex mnemonic system devised specially for the purpose from about the 15th century BC. When writing was introduced into India, doubtless by traders, probably about the 6th or 7th century BC, from some as yet unidentified Semitic alphabet, it was regarded as a practical tool for keeping accounts and inventories, but the idea of actually writing books with it seems not to have occurred to the ancient Indians, as the oral tradition was still all-powerful for all types of literature, whether religious, poetical or technical. The belief in the superiority of the spoken to the written word is one of the most long-lasting of Indian cultural traditions, and has survived to the present day.

The ancient Indian grammarians had, by the 5th century BC, scientifically analysed the phonetic system of the Sanskrit language, and arranged the letters of their alphabet on a thoroughly rational system, vowels before consonants, the latter being grouped according to their class—all the gutturals, palatals, labials, etc., together. This they had probably achieved without the help of writing, so the introduction of the written alphabet caused them no difficulties in relating sounds to symbols. The *Brāhmī* (Divine script) used in the inscriptions of Ashoka in the 3rd century BC is found all over the subcontinent, and from it developed all the multitudinous scripts of India and their offshoots in Central Asia, Tibet and south-east Asia, with the exception of Kharoshthi, derived from Aramaic, used in north-western India for a few centuries.

There is nothing that is fixed or sacred about any script in India, for Indian culture regarded the oral tradition as far superior to the written, unlike for example the Arabs. To the latter, the Koran is the word of God revealed to His Prophet and its written form therefore was beautified by the arts of calligraphy and illumination. The Indians took a different standpoint—the *Vedas* were God's revelation and couched in *devabhāṣā*, the language of the gods, *i.e.* Sanskrit. For 1,000 years, the *Vedas* had been handed down orally, each teaching and recitation being the recreation of precisely the same sounds as the original revelation. The ability to commit the eternal revelation on to transient leaf or bark or even stone seemed at best irrelevant, and, at worst, blasphemous. Hence Sanskrit has no script of its own, uniquely associated with it; it can be written in any Indian script, ancient or modern, with equal facility. There was no standard form of letter to which developments of different styles in different parts of India could be compared, and without this standard of reference, local developments became entrenched. Thus from century to century in a dozen different parts of India, the scripts changed and developed at their own pace, until they became mutually unreadable.

As a record of their sacred books, writing was of no use to the ancient orthodox followers of the Vedic religion. But when heterodox movements broke away from the sacrificial cult of the *Vedas*, when it became necessary to remember precisely the words spoken by the Buddha, and by Mahāvīra and his predecessors who founded the Jaina system, then writing was seen to have a purpose other than that of recording inventories. In the Indian manuscript tradition there was henceforth a division between the heterodox Buddhists and Jainas and the orthodox Hindus.

As we have seen, it would seem to have been physically impossible to commit large texts to writing in the early Buddhist period, as there was no suitable writing material; and that it was culturally impossible is demonstrated by the fear, expressed several times in the Canon, that a given *sutta* or discourse of the Buddha might be lost forever if an old monk had no one to teach it to. Yet as the generations passed, and divisions arose among both the Buddhists and Jainas, it became of the first priority to establish precisely what their human teachers had said through the memories of those who had known them and passed on their teaching to disciples. The accounts necessarily varied, and it was to reconcile these versions that councils met to fix the canonical texts, *i.e.* the words of the founders, and to ensure that they could not be lost by committing them to writing. From this gigantic step away from the Vedic tradition it was but an easy further step, common to all mankind, to want to do it as beautifully as possible, to develop the arts of calligraphy and manuscript decoration. Tradition records that the texts fixed by the Buddhist councils were engraved on sheets of gold, and there is no need to doubt this, as engraving important documents and religious texts on sheets of the precious metals is relatively common in later periods. The early Buddhist manuscripts recovered from both Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent include superb examples of calligraphy. From about the 11th century calligraphy was enhanced by illustrations in both Buddhist and Jaina manuscripts.

The orthodox followers of the Vedic cult were not unaffected by the powerful Buddhist and Jaina sects, and had their own literature of withdrawal and asceticism, the Upanishads. But the primacy they accorded to sound rather than to writing did not allow them to be seduced from the oral tradition, which affected not only religious and philosophical texts, but also works of literature, the law, and numerous other fields. Perhaps an exception was made for technical literature such as medicine or astronomy, as the only ancient Indian manuscripts so far recorded which are not specifically Buddhist are in these fields. Yet the tradition changed, most probably after AD 1200, with the collapse of the Hindu kingdoms before the armies of Shihab ad-Dīn Ghori and the wholesale destruction of cities, temples, monasteries, and the apparent imminent loss of the entire Hindu tradition. Writing was seen to have a purpose in transmitting knowledge that would otherwise be lost for ever. Yet starting so late, the Hindus had missed 1,000 years of calligraphic development, and their task was one of urgently recording literature that might disappear for ever rather than of writing texts as beautifully as possible. Yet even in more settled and prosperous times, when there was occasion to prepare illustrated copies of Hindu texts, as in the late 15th and 16th centuries, the writing is pedestrian at best, but often full of deletions and corrected mistakes. Even in the Rajput courts in the 17th century, apparently so completely secure that no time and effort was spared on the production of superbly illustrated copies of Hindu texts, there is no improvement in calligraphy. It is only in the 18th century that we find Hindu manuscripts which have any pretensions to calligraphic elegance, and this only under direct influence of illumination as perfected at the Mughal courts, consequent upon the dispersal of the imperial library from the early 18th century onwards and of its artists and scribes.

Like most visual arts, those of the book could flourish only when there was patronage. Many manuscripts bear no evidence of the cause of their

existence, but from those which do, it is possible to build up a picture of the different kinds of patronage found in India. The earliest surviving illuminated manuscripts are those of the sacred scriptures of the two heterodox religions of Buddhism and Jainism. Sometimes, the colophons state the name of a commissioner, who would have paid for the work to be done for his spiritual benefit (*punyārtham*) and that of his parents and other members of the family. The manuscript was written and illuminated by monks in their monastery, and remained in the institutional library or temple. The merit accrued by the commissioners counted as a good deed to enter on the balance sheet which determined their status in their next incarnation according to the laws of *karma*. Where no commissioner is mentioned, the book must have been illuminated for the benefit of the monks themselves. The beautification of sacred texts because of their divine origin, as an end in itself, was an idea foreign to all Indian conceptions. The Hindus would not seem even to have shared the Buddhist-Jaina view of the spiritual merit to be gained from the commissioning of illuminated manuscripts.

The Muslim conquest at the end of the 12th century introduced into India the Iranian tradition of court patronage and of court studios of book-production, and some at least of the Sultans of Delhi and the successor sultanates in the provinces established studios in their own capitals. It seems probable that a few powerful Hindu princes of northern India did the same. But their efforts seem paltry when compared with the immense studio established by the Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556–1605), and it was under this influence that later Hindu and Muslim courts set up their own studios, whose standard of work so very often depended on the interest shown by the royal patron.

The major arts of the book are fourfold—calligraphy (fine writing), illumination (embellishment with abstract designs in gold and colours), illustration (the addition of figural paintings), and binding (the adornment of the covers between which the leaves are protected). Other crafts involved include the preparation of the writing material (paper, palm leaf or bark in an Indian context); burnishing the written leaves; sewing or stringing them together; the mounting of paintings in album leaves; marginating in gold and colours; and remargining of worn-out leaves. We do not propose to treat any of these arts separately, as could be done when dealing with the book-arts of a unitary culture, such as for example the Muslim world, for India's traditions embrace too many cultures for an overall view to be as yet possible, while our knowledge of some of these arts is rudimentary. Indian calligraphy, for example, as opposed to palaeography is a totally uncharted area, where absolute canons of judgement in the form of native critiques and treatises do not exist. We propose instead to develop these themes as occasion arises as we survey the Indian tradition of the art of the book from the earliest survivals right up to the 19th century, bearing in mind that for the early period up to 1500 so much has been lost that our knowledge can never be more than partial.

For although the manuscript heritage of India is enormous, with huge libraries filled with millions of manuscripts, they represent but a small part of the tradition. Manuscripts dating from before 1000 are pitifully few, yet the first millennium AD was the greatest period of India's culture, when her literature, drama, painting, sculpture and architecture had reached their greatest heights. Literary works from these centuries have



PLATE I 6 f. 89b (detail). A Bodhisattva, perhaps Ratnapāṇi, holding a white lotus, on which the distinguished object is no longer visible. Hayagrīva is in attendance.

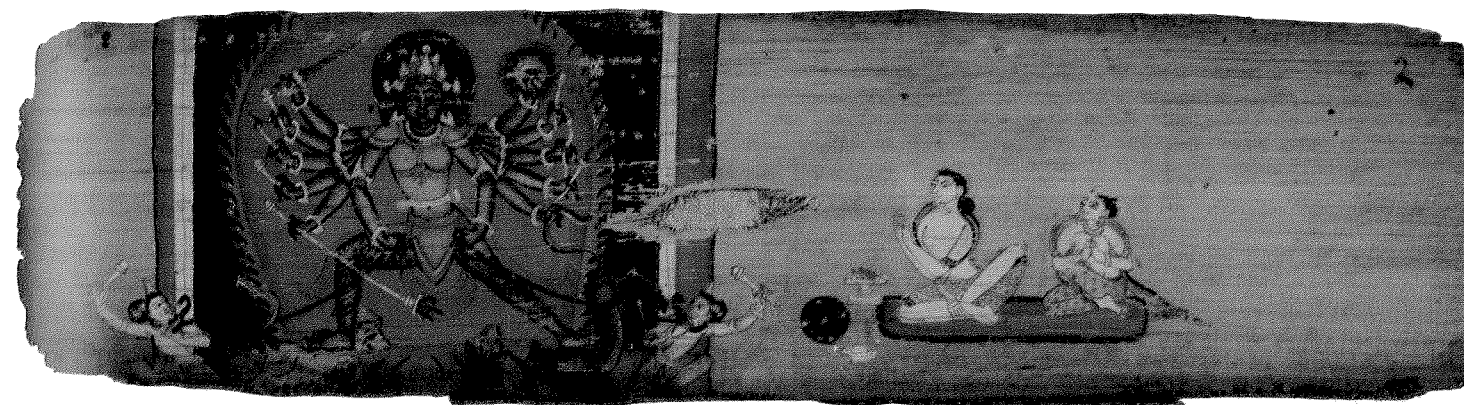


PLATE II 14 f. 2. The Goddess slaying the Buffalo-demon; with the donors of the manuscript in praying attitudes.

Corrections to colour section

PLATE I for distinguished read
distinguishing

PLATE IV for Indira read Indra

PLATE XI transpose (above) and (below)



PLATE III 7 ff.163b, 164. The Bodhisattvas Avalokiteshvara Simhanāda (above) and Maitreya (below) mark the end of the 11th chapter of the *Prajñāpāramitā*.

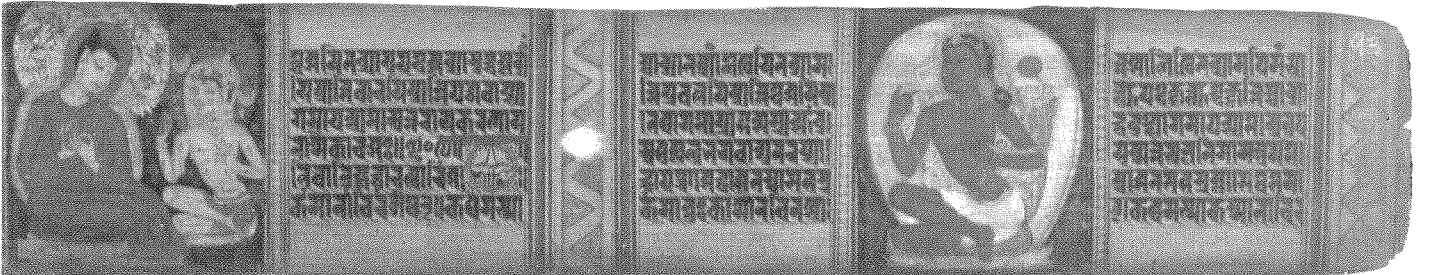


PLATE IV 5 ff.92b, 93 (detail). The Jina Vajrasattva and Bodhisattva Vajrapāni (above) and the Buddha teaching Indira and the Bodhisattva Jaliniprabhā (below).

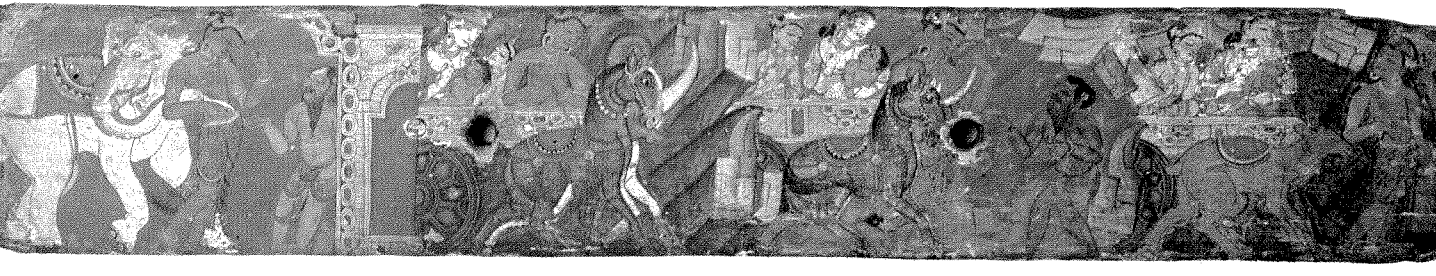


PLATE V 12 Prince Vessantara gives away his elephant (left), goes into exile with his family (centre), and gives away his chariot (right).

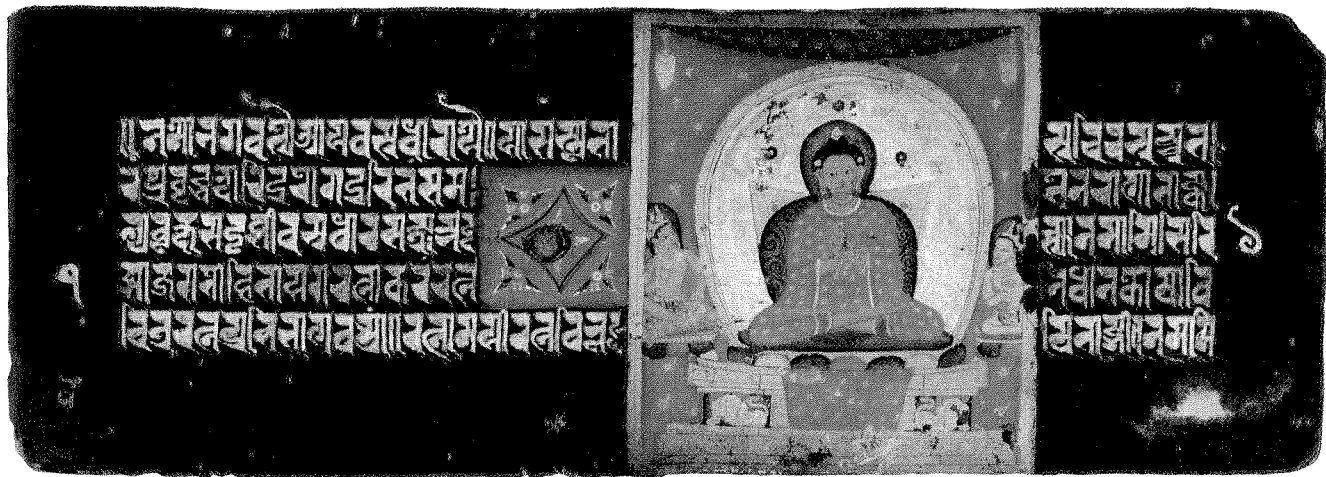


PLATE VI 11 ff.1b, 2. The Buddha in *dharmacakra mudrā* (above) and the six-armed Vasudhārā (below).



PLATE VII 16 (detail). The Jina Mahāvīra, lustrated by elephants, with attendants and worshippers.

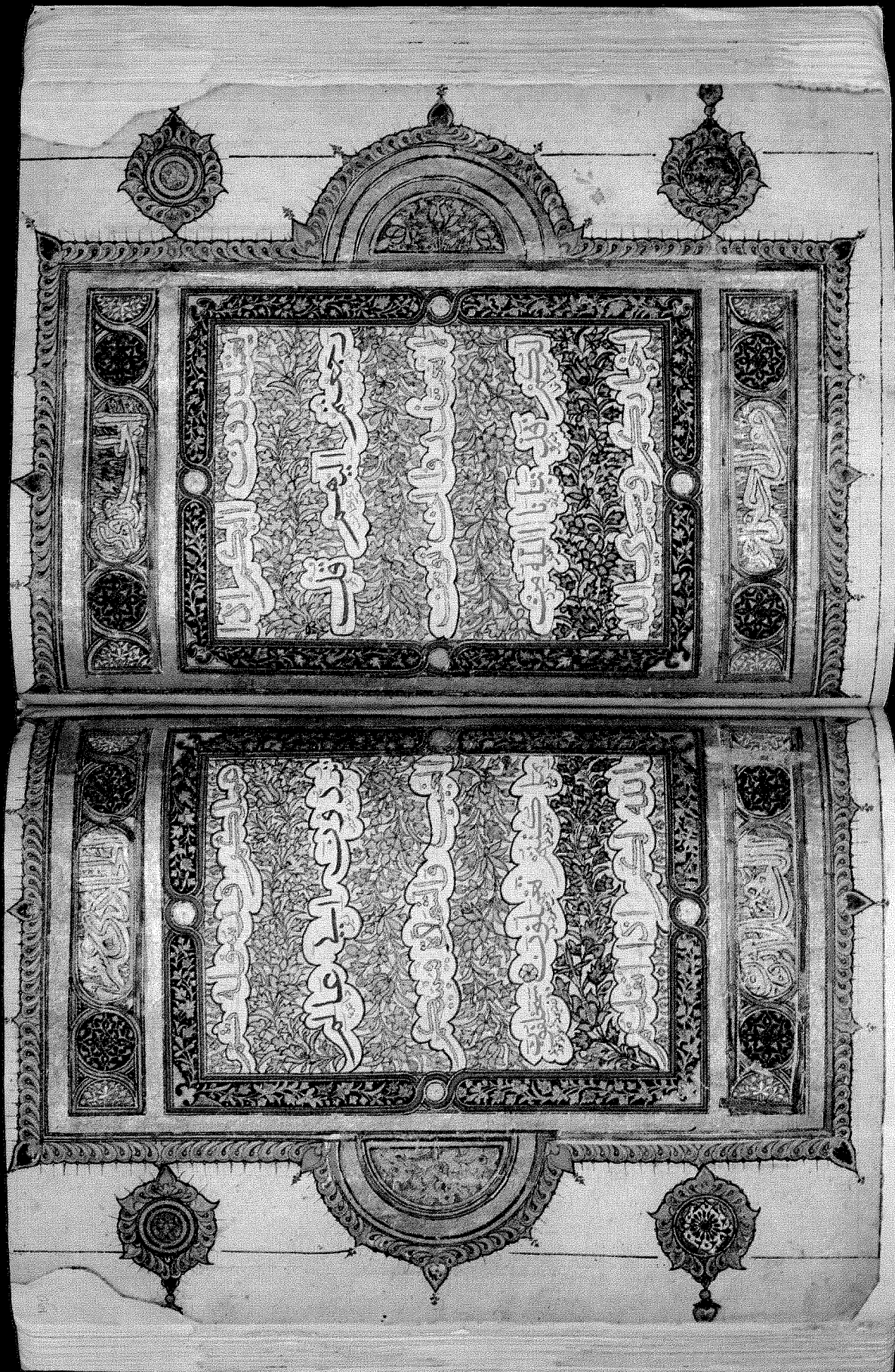


PLATE IX 26 f.19b. The soothsayers consult their scrolls to determine the meaning of Queen Trishalā's 14 dreams, and write their opinions.



PLATE X 28 f.15b. The parents of the Jina Mahāvīra, Siddhārtha and Trishalā. The Queen is dreaming her 14 dreams which foretell the Jina's birth.



PLATE XI 29 ff.9b, 10. Kālaka turns the bricks to gold, for supplies for the Sāhi's army (above); and the battle between the armies of the Sāhi and the King of Ujjain (below).

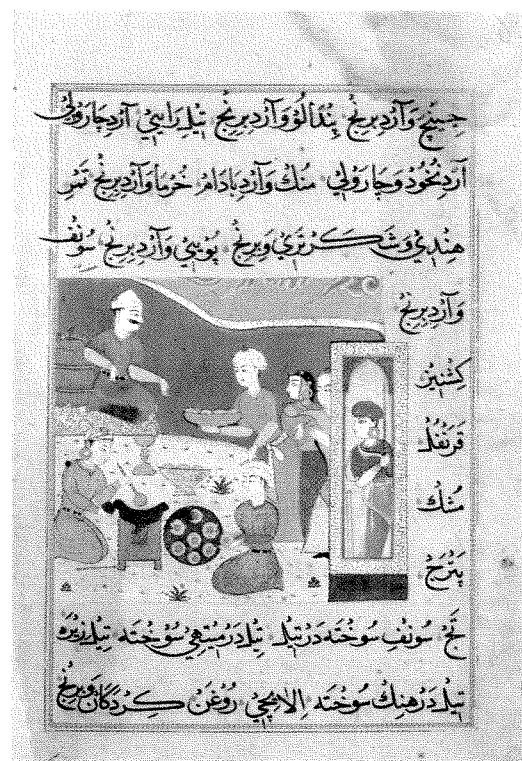


PLATE XII 41 f.83b. Preparation of sweets for the Sultan of Mandu.

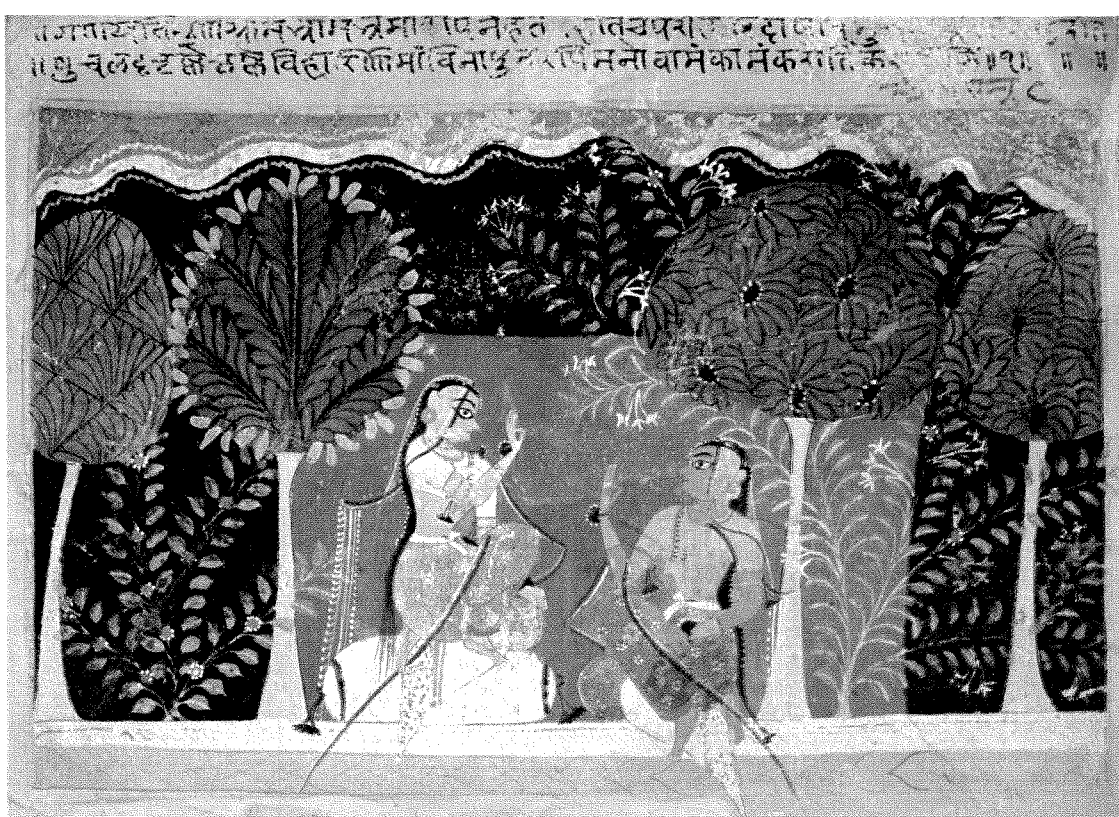


PLATE XIV 37 Rādhā addresses her confidante in the groves of Brindaban.

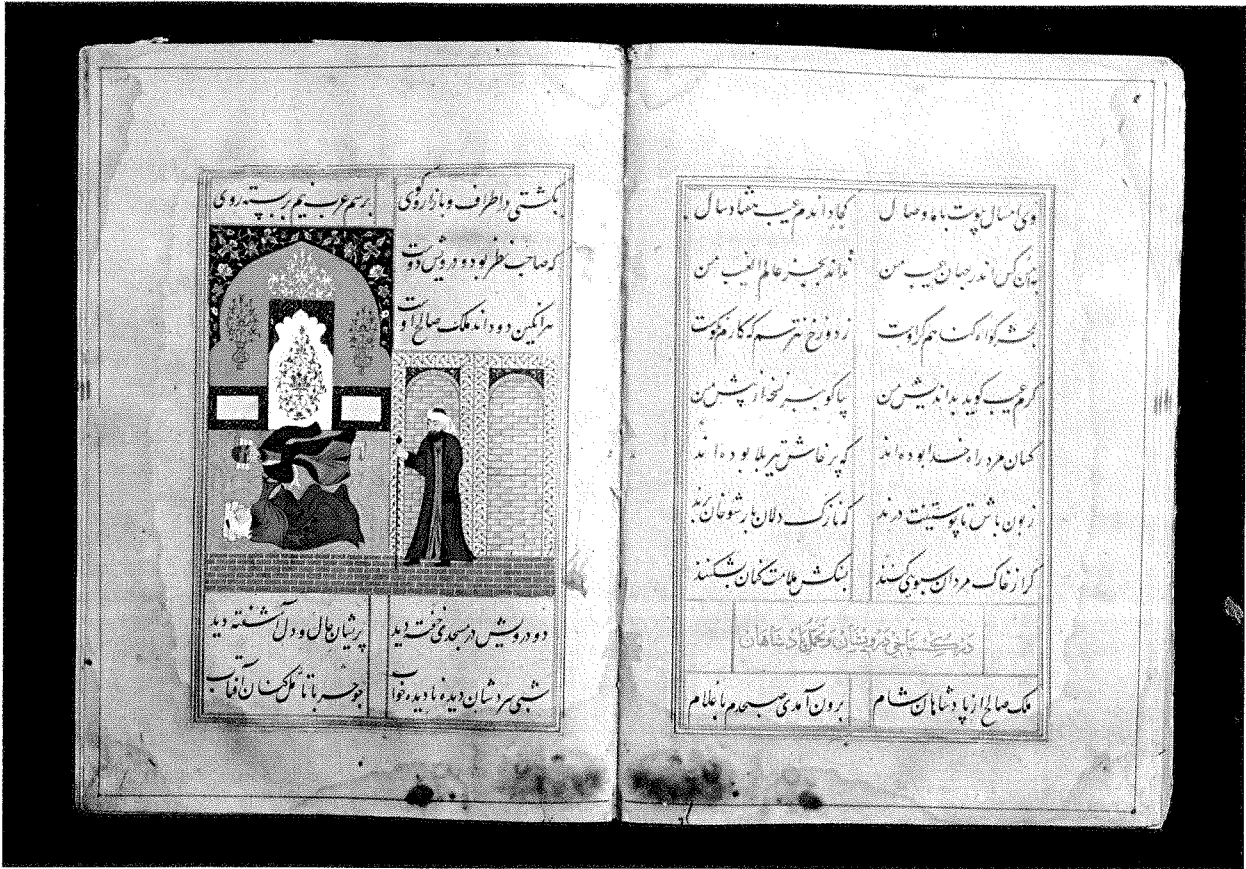


PLATE XIII 42 ff.133b, 134. King Sālīh discovers two dervishes sleeping in a mosque.



PLATE XV 44 ff.31b, 32. Alexander receives Roshanak, the daughter of Darius.